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Found in Translation: Chaim Soutine and English Art

Martin Hammer

The impact of the work of Chaim Soutine (1893–43) on certain well-known British painters after 1945 provides a case study in the transmission of artistic ideas across time and space. Indeed, aside from its intrinsic historical interest, the material crystallises an issue of method that is worth airing in a journal committed to multi-disciplinary investigation of the modernist project. There are enormous critical gains, it goes without saying, but what might potentially be lost by highlighting affinities and connections across creative media? Is there a danger of losing sight of important features of the process of artistic production? At any rate art historians, in their urge to embed interdisciplinary theory within their discipline and to foreground decipherable meaning, have for some time been inclined to neglect, or even to dismiss as outmoded and formalist, a mode of critical analysis which is more narrowly visual in conception, and which found one of its most coherent expositions in a book published exactly fifty years ago, namely Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*.¹ I offer this study as a modest homage to book and author at this moment of the volume's anniversary, and as a pointer to the continuing relevance of Gombrich's approach, beyond the parameters of his own preoccupations with realism and the psychology of perception. His core argument at a deeper level was that artists generate their work out of a vast array of impulses and assumptions, conscious or unconscious, and in response to a wide range of stimuli and determinants, but that in doing so they inescapably adapt the available resources and conventions of art itself, as practised by their

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predecessors and contemporaries. In their own work, that is to say, they in some way extend (if they are artists, that is, of any substance) the existing tradition or, metaphorically speaking, language of their particular medium. This might at times seem an end in itself, from the perspective of the artist, but it is also what permits him or her to articulate ideas, express feelings and attitudes, represent the external world, and generally engage and shape the spectator's response to their art. Much the same argument could doubtless be elaborated in the cases of other creative media.

Indeed, one might even say something comparable about art historians. Gombrich himself was giving a new twist in *Art and Illusion* to thinking developed within the Germanic disciplinary tradition to which he was heir, represented by figures working on either side of 1900 such as Aby Warburg, Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Reigl. He acknowledged as much in *Art and Illusion* when he summarised his position: 'All paintings, as Wölfflin said, owe more to other paintings than they owe to direct observation'.² Gombrich's work in turn stimulated the late Michael Baxandall, his student and subsequent colleague at the Warburg Institute in London, to address the vexed themes of artistic tradition and the interplay between artists in his 1985 book *Patterns of Influence*.³ Here Baxandall theorised an idea that was implicit in *Art and Illusion*, namely that significant artists proceed not by passively absorbing aspects of their artistic inheritance (the dread notion of 'influence'), but rather by actively appropriating and transforming to their own distinctive ends, in very varied ways, possibilities that seem to them to be latent in art they have encountered. Such a process is, by this account, integral to the processes of artistic creation and invention, as well as a precondition to the transmission of meaning.

I wish to recuperate this art-historical tradition in examining the inspiration that several English painters derived in the 1940s and 1950s from looking at the work of Soutine. Firstly, some concise background is in order. Soutine was born in 1893 in Smilovichi, a village near Minsk in Belarus, which was then within the Pale of Settlement, the area of Russia reserved for Jews. Having trained in Minsk, he moved to Paris in 1913, and became friendly with the likes of the painter Amedeo Modigliani and the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz. Landscape, still-life and the figure were the genres in which he specialised during the inter-war period, in a style characterised by loose, even crude brushwork, rhythmic distortion and bold, heightened colour (qualities that are of course particularly difficult to convey in reproduction).

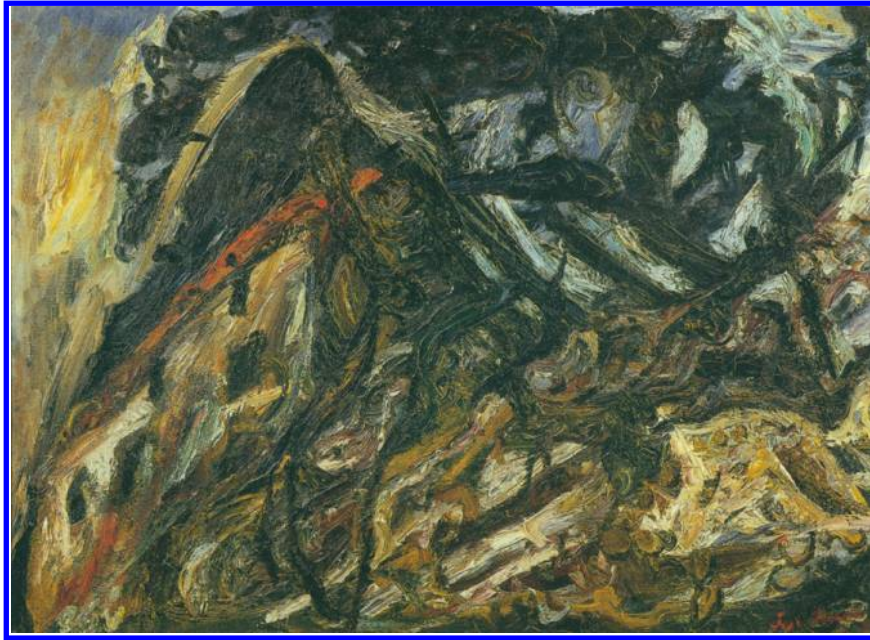


Fig. 1. Chaim Soutine, *Landscape at Céret*, c. 1920–1. Oil on canvas. 61 × 83.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

The art of Soutine was introduced to British audiences at large by a substantial exhibition staged in 1963 at the Edinburgh Festival and then at the Tate Gallery, accompanied by a catalogue from the show's enthusiastic curator David Sylvester.⁴ Both exhibition and publication surveyed the trajectory of Soutine's art, from the mid-1910s to the early 1940s, and the full range of his subject-matter. Yet in his text Sylvester chose to give pride of place to one period, Soutine's work from around 1920, and he focused on a specific image of the picturesque town of Céret, in the foothills of the French Pyrenees (Figure 1). At this painting, which he clearly knew intimately, the critic threw some of his finest purple prose, in an effort to evoke the metaphorical suggestions that viewers might take from the picture, given its striking departures both from descriptive naturalism and from the more tasteful pictorial effects familiar from current British responses to landscape imagery:

Here is a jungle of colour, layer upon impenetrable layer, not murky but of a luxurious darkness in which light is held as in porphyry or basalt... Whether it is noon or dusk, whether it is raining or the wind is blowing, is of no concern. Nor is it really a matter of importance what things the shapes stand for—that this is a hill or a house or a

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tree... Our awareness cuts through objects. It responds to rhythms, to an interplay of forces... The picture is about action... it is Dionysian in that it works upon us in imagination like an intoxicant... Outside us everything merges, becomes fluid, fluid in its boundaries, fluid in identity... This is an art of pure sensation, an art in which the painter has bodied forth in paint his experience of the motif in front of him without giving thought to the names of the elements...⁵

Landscape at Céret, the picture in question, became public property the following year, when the Tate Gallery acquired it for their collection in the wake of the Soutine show.⁶ But if the 1963 show launched the artist's reputation for a wide audience, it marked the fruition of a sustained and intense engagement with Soutine's work, especially the pictures from the Céret period and the Tate picture in particular, on the part of a more select artistic circle in Britain. In 1959 Sylvester had already announced, in his review of a major Soutine exhibition in Paris for *The New York Times*: 'No painter of the years between the wars has had so widespread an influence on post-war painting'.⁷ Soutine had evidently eclipsed the likes of Picasso and Matisse, Miró and Mondrian, such inspirational figures before 1939.

Not that Soutine had been an entirely obscure figure during the period before the Second World War. From extremely humble beginnings, he had become a relatively successful and collectible Parisian painter, whose work appealed mostly to critics and collectors who liked their modern art rooted in description of the everyday world, the likes of Alfred Barnes, for example, creator eventually of the Barnes Foundation just outside Philadelphia, who amassed Soutines in quantity to hang next to his Post-Impressionist masterpieces and African masks. The art of Soutine at that point seemed to be a compelling extension of the great French tradition of heightened realism, embracing Courbet, Van Gogh and Cézanne, and also in a more contemporary context to belong with artists like Modigliani, Utrillo and Pascin under the catch-all heading of the School of Paris. The term clustered together artists who did not belong to a programmatic movement, such as Surrealism, and who could act as an antidote to modernist extremism. One would certainly not describe Soutine as a talisman for the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, the artist himself had in fact come to loathe the most experimental phase of his work and had tried to destroy as many early pictures as he could lay his hands on. Fortunately, a good few of these clogged and vehement pictures survived his self-censorship. Yet it was not until after the artist's death in 1943 that they came to be seen as his most important contribution.

So what changed? Soutine's own demise probably helped. His later years, as a Jew in occupied France, were exceptionally difficult and by the time he came out of hiding to seek medical assistance it was too late. This personal tragedy took on a much broader symbolic resonance, given that the wider world and mood had changed so dramatically since the late 1930s. In the wake of the horrors of the war and the subsequent revelations of the Holocaust in 1945, younger artists in diverse centres understandably felt the need to articulate a new sensibility appropriate to tragic times, and in so doing to sidestep the legacies of both post-Cubist abstraction, which could now seem merely decorative, and also the narcissistic indulgences of Surrealism. In this context, the early work of Soutine pointed one possible way forward. The artist's post-war reputation and impact in France and the United States, where the largest collections and the most important exhibitions were to be viewed, has received significant attention from art historians, notably in the catalogue for the 1998 Soutine show 'An Expressionist in Paris', staged at the Jewish Museum in New York.⁸ The scholarly catalogue, probably the single most illuminating publication on the artist, documented the proliferation in Paris of books, exhibitions and new critical evaluations. Moreover, it has long been recognised in the literature on American Abstract Expressionism that the 1950 Soutine retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was a powerful catalyst for many artists, and that Willem De Kooning was a particular Soutine fan. The illustrated catalogue by Mortimer Wheeler evidently became a staple of artists' studios in the 1950s.⁹ Over and above the contemporary artistic relevance that could be projected onto the radical spontaneity and painterliness of Soutine's work, it may well be the case, as the organisers of the Jewish Museum show speculated, that his art had now come to register, in apocalyptic vein, as 'a memorial . . . to Europe's murdered Jews . . . Might not the eviscerated cows and the fowl in the throes of death be experienced as modernist . . . reminders of man's darkest, cruellest and most primitive instincts? Couldn't Soutine's eruptive, vertiginous landscapes be construed as recollections of a ravaged Europe, or even as the foreshadowing of an apocalyptic post-atomic future?'¹⁰

Here I want to consider the more neglected story of how British artists responded to Soutine. A failure to address the topic is virtually the only common ground between Helen Lessore's hagiographic *A Partial Testament* (1986) and James Hyman's more analytical *The Battle for Realism* (2001), both of which sought to offer a synoptic account of such artists as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. In monographs and catalogues on their work, references

to Soutine are confined to the occasional passing comment. There are nods to Soutine in the recent literature on Bacon, including the catalogue of the 2008–2009 centenary show.¹¹ Likewise, Soutine's name receives fleeting mention in the catalogue for the 2009 Courtauld Institute Gallery show of Auerbach's powerful building-site pictures from the 1950s and early 1960s, although French post-war contemporaries such as Fautrier and Dubuffet are more prominently introduced as points of comparison.¹² Yet there is no doubt that Sylvester had such painters from Britain in mind when he offered his extravagant assessment of Soutine's postwar importance in 1959. One might go further and suggest that, as was perhaps quite often the case, Sylvester's critical judgements were to a large extent extrapolated from artists' studio talk. I shall argue that it was the painters whom the critic admired and promoted in the 1950s who had started to turn Soutine into a cult figure. Bacon, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff have been identified not just as the core membership of the 'School of London', another less than helpful term, but if we wanted to find meaningful common ground between such seemingly disparate painters, a fervent interest in the art of Soutine is probably as good a place as any to start (another would be their immersion in the native inheritance of Walter Sickert).¹³ The questions we need to ask are: when exactly did they encounter Soutine, what particular works did they know in the flesh as well as in reproduction, and what sorts of picture did they especially respond to; given their own diversity and artistic independence, how did they adapt Soutine's example to their individual purposes; and why did they all find his art so exciting?

The availability of Soutine's work to new generations of English artists after the war presupposed its earlier collectibility. The growing fashion for Soutine among collectors underpinned several one-man shows that had taken place in the Leicester, Storrán and Redfern Galleries in London during the late 1930s.¹⁴ Five works were shown in the Lefevre Gallery show *The Tragic Painters*, held in June 1938.¹⁵ The term is prevalent in early Soutine criticism, and here, typically, it refers to the tragedy of the artist's isolation from society, rather than any broader sense of the drift of the late 1930s.¹⁶ However, the constricted circumstances of the Second World War meant that such works remained in British collections. After 1945 they began to resurface in commercial galleries, which meant that artists were able to confront the actual paintings. Notably, such pictures formed the basis of the 1947 Soutine show staged by Gimpel Fils, a gallery which specialised in the School of Paris and work by progressive British contemporaries. The bulk of the eighteen pictures shown on that

occasion were credited to named collectors, including the painters Adrian Ryan and Edward Le Bas, both owners of examples of the dead animal pictures for which Soutine was famed.¹⁷ Another picture of dead pheasants had been in London for some time, and was currently owned by Mrs I. Oliver Parker.¹⁸ Further works, discussed in detail below, belonged to the dealer Erica Brausen, then of the Redfern Gallery, who subsequently ran the Hanover Gallery, and to Eardley Knollys, who was a painter himself but is better known for running the Storran Gallery.¹⁹ The 1931 *Lady in Blue* owned by Robert Sainsbury is now in the collection of the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich, while a version of *The Cook* was owned in 1947 by Ernest Duveen.²⁰ Another pair of pictures had been lent by one Maurice Goldman.²¹ *Paysage d'orage* was almost certainly the picture that inspired Sylvester to rhapsodic commentary in 1963, given that its early title was *Landscape at Céret (The Storm)*, a misguided meteorological reading of the picture's turbulent and dramatic interpretation of its landscape motif. Ownership was not indicated in 1947, but the future Tate work was in the possession at this stage of Rex de C. Nan Kivell, one of the directors of the Redfern Gallery, who had acquired the work for himself from their 1938 Soutine show.²²

In sum, it was still possible in 1947 to assemble a representative display of good Soutines from British collections or gallery stock. In his brief essay for the catalogue, Maurice Collis rehearsed familiar perceptions of the artist. He noted that Soutine coincided with, but resisted, the prevailing pre-war movements: 'Though daily breathing the air of every kind of experiment, he remained entirely impervious to their suggestion'. His affinities rather were with the painterly, emotive art of Van Gogh and Expressionism: 'This tense, wild and melancholy mood gives Soutine's paintings their force. But mood cannot be separated from the means used to express it. Soutine's craftsmanship is of the highest quality'. This was, he noted, an unusual opportunity to see his work: 'Alas! His pictures are now rare on the market... The present exhibition is not likely to be followed in London by another. Let us look at Soutine while we can'.²³ Artists and other interested parties clearly proceeded to do exactly that.

As Collis predicted, there were no further single artist shows thereafter until the 1963 exhibition. Four Soutines were shown in the major *L'Ecole de Paris 1900–1950* exhibition staged at the Royal Academy in 1951.²⁴ Otherwise it was group shows in commercial galleries that provided the occasional opportunity to run into a Soutine. I want to speculate for the remainder of this article on the impact that such encounters may have made on artists. They could

also of course have been looking at reproductions, but it seems to me that the pictorial qualities and excitement of Soutine are likely to have been much more apparent when works were confronted in the original. One should concede, however, that it is not always straightforward to establish which precise pictures were exhibited in London during this period. The problem here is the general inadequacy of the Soutine record, given that the artist himself simply did not care about signing and dating works, and that there was evidently no one else around to keep a tally of what was shown where, and what was sold and bought by whom. The *Catalogue Raisonné* of Soutine's paintings by Maurice Tuchman and others is a wonderful source of illustrations and information, but it does not even mention some of the group shows I have unearthed, while the provenance histories are not at all thorough, and the authors took a somewhat cautious stance in relation to the minefield of Soutine attributions.²⁵ In consequence, when we survey the list of eighteen pictures exhibited at Gimpel Fils in 1947, for which information about titles, dimensions and sometimes owners is all that is provided in the catalogue, but no dates, it proves impossible at this stage to pin down the bulk of the pictures that were on view. In the discussion that follows, nevertheless, I have tried as far as possible to limit my argument about inspiration derived to a few particular Soutines that can be documented with some certainty as having featured in London gallery shows.

It has often been noted that Francis Bacon's *Painting* (1946) descended from a tradition of butchery images epitomised not just by Rembrandts such as the *Carcass of Beef* (1657) in the Louvre but also by variations on the theme by Soutine. Bacon could certainly have known the versions in which the suspended Crucifix-like carcass is rendered with the artist's characteristic heightened palette and painterly touch. It is worth noting that one such Soutine had been in Britain for several years, in the collection of Eardley Knollys, who was a good friend of Graham Sutherland's, to whom in turn Bacon had become close in the mid 1940s.²⁶ The picture was in fact included in the Lefevre Gallery *School of Paris (Picasso and his Contemporaries)* exhibition that immediately followed the legendary group show of April 1945 which had launched Bacon, thanks to its inclusion of his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) and *Figure in a Landscape* (1945) alongside pictures by Sutherland and others.²⁷ In this particular, rather atypical variation on the carcass image, Soutine focused on one slab of beef, lingering upon its rich colouration, textures and intricate structure. Memories of the picture may well have informed Bacon's own ribs of beef, suspended to such compelling expressive effect on

the tubular metal podium in front of his generic Fascist dictator, in the dense and ambitious picture he executed during the first half of 1946. Interestingly, when David Sylvester published his first critical response to Bacon, for a French audience, he related the artist to 'Soutine's *écorché*' as well as to 'Picasso's Surrealist period'.²⁸

Decades later, Sylvester recalled that 'In the 1950s, Soutine was one of the two twentieth-century artists for whom Bacon expressed enormous admiration'.²⁹ The other, incongruously enough, was Pierre Bonnard. We know that Bacon owned a copy of Wheeler's seminal catalogue for the 1950 Museum of Modern Art show. It survived amongst the detritus of the Reece Mews studio, and the inside of its covers featured examples of the drawings that Bacon was supposed not to have made, but which emerged from several sources after his death.³⁰ Bacon was also obsessed by Van Gogh, who was such an obvious point of departure for Soutine, and the key prototype for the image of the artist as an alienated and tragic outsider. Not using preliminary studies, and improvising directly on the canvas, featured constantly in the mythology around Soutine, as did a proclivity for destroying his own pictures in great quantity, in fits of dissatisfaction, a practice which critics were already talking about in the case of Bacon by the late 1940s. Bacon had plenty of opportunity to assimilate such stories about Soutine from friends like Peter Watson (who evidently owned a Soutine), Isabel Rawsthorne and Peter Rose-Pulham, who had all spent considerable amounts of time in Paris in the 1930s, let alone from the available illustrated publications, and one is bound to wonder how far his entire image of himself as an artist was shaped by an awareness of Soutine.³¹ Certainly Bacon's identification with the earlier artist comes over strongly in a 1958 TV interview with Daniel Farson, when Bacon stated:

Two of the very finest artists of our time—Picasso and Soutine—are two diametrically opposed types. Picasso is a man with enormous gifts who can do practically anything he wants. Soutine was a man with an enormous love of painting, who never drew, who painted his pictures directly and had deliberately never developed his technique. And he didn't develop his technique because he thought he would keep the thing cleaner and rawer by that method.³²

By general consent, it was not until around 1956–57, notably in works such as *Figure in a Mountain Landscape* (1956) and the extended series of Van Gogh variations, that Bacon allowed his interest in early Soutine to exert a visible influence on the flamboyant brushwork and general look of his own pictures. In the latter case, the fusion suggests a

sense of artistic lineage, whereby Van Gogh begat Soutine who in turn begat Bacon himself. Bacon's often noted affinity at this point with De Kooning, especially the *Woman* pictures from the early 1950s, may reflect the parallel stimulus the two artists absorbed from Soutine, rather than any direct mutual awareness.

Lucian Freud was another early Soutine fan, as well as a close friend of Bacon's from the early 1940s onwards. In the literature on the artist, presumably drawing on conversations with Freud, one is told that he encountered works by Soutine during his extended trips to Paris in 1946 and after. Lawrence Gowing, for example, recorded Freud's lingering admiration for the Soutine paintings of dead animals that he was able to view on such visits.³³ It is also well known that Freud himself had already produced several drawings and paintings of dead rabbits, chickens and herons in the period from 1943 to 1945. This might merely suggest that he was well prepared to respond to Soutine. However the convergence of imagery raises the alternative possibility that Freud had already contemplated relevant Soutine models in Britain. During the war years he had evidently become close to the painter Adrian Ryan, who, as noted above, was listed as owning the *Flayed Rabbit* by Soutine that featured in the 1947 Gimpel Fils show. The nature of the short-lived personal connection with Freud is described in a recent study of Ryan, which also cites John Russell's observation in 1974 that Freud had been impressed by the 'emotional immediacy' of the pair of Soutines hanging in Ryan's flat at 48 Tite Street, where Freud frequently stayed over.³⁴ It was mainly from Eardley Knollys and the Storrans Gallery that Ryan acquired his collection of modern French pictures, including the *Flayed Rabbit*, which he bought in March 1943 and then sold on at auction in March 1949.³⁵ This certainly coincides with the time when he and Freud were in close contact, judging from the evidence of Ryan's 1944 painting *Chicken in a Bucket*, which was based on a drawing that Freud had given him, as readily acknowledged in the inscription 'From a drawing by Lucian Freud, to whom this is dedicated. August 1944'.³⁶ Ryan's own work from this period is overtly indebted to Soutine's dead animal pictures, and the connection reinforces the argument that the same might equally have been true for Freud.³⁷ Unfortunately, there is no visual record of Ryan's *Flayed Rabbit*, and whether it was comparable in style and motif to the celebrated variation on the theme in the collection of the Barnes Foundation (Figure 7).³⁸ The identity of the second Soutine he evidently owned is also unclear.

There has always been a certain mythology of the innocent eye around Freud and his work. Writers tend uncritically to cite the artist's



Fig. 2. Lucian Freud, *Girl with Roses*, 1947/8. Oil on canvas. 105×74.5 cm.
The British Council.

own comments about intense visual scrutiny of his subject precluding pictorial inspiration – ‘My method was so arduous that there was no room for influence’ – as if his fellow Viennese émigré Ernst Gombrich had not demonstrated in *Art and Illusion* that observation of nature is always mediated by artistic conventions and responses, which shape pictorial decisions about choice and treatment of subject matter.³⁹ If Freud was indeed taking his cue to some degree from the subject-matter and poignant atmosphere of Soutine’s work, albeit translating that point of departure into a totally opposed artistic language, might it not equally be the case that his subsequent paintings of the human figure, such as *Girl with Roses* of 1947–48 (Figure 2), likewise reflected an immersion in Soutine’s depictions of seated girls, with their expressively charged body language and exaggerated features? It is impossible to identify the two paintings shown at Gimpel Fils

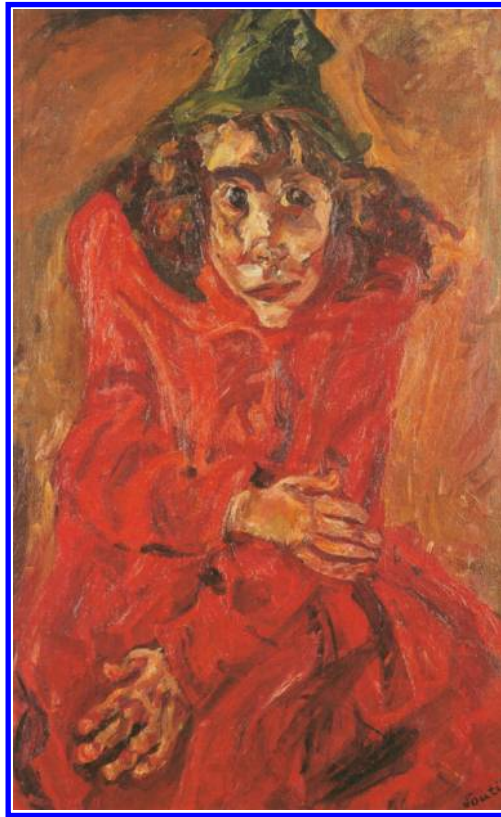


Fig. 3. Chaim Soutine, *The Mad Woman/La Folle*, c. 1919. Oil on canvas. 95.9×60 cm. The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan.

in 1947 under the title *Portrait of a Young Girl*, since no details of ownership are provided, but these might have had a bearing on *Girl with Roses* and comparable Freuds. Less predictably, however, it is worth noting that *The Mad Woman* (c. 1919) was almost certainly one of the pictures shown, assuming, as do the authors of the Soutine *Catalogue Raisonné*, that this was the same as *La Folle* (Figure 3), the picture lent by Erica Brausen, of the Redfern Gallery, who the previous year had purchased Bacon's *Painting* (1946) and proceeded to sell it two years later to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding all the obvious differences in the motif and its treatment between the painterly Soutine and the tightly executed, linear Freud, one might also note in both pictures the enlarged eyes, shoulder length hair, the curl of hair falling on the forehead, the exaggerated curvature of the chin beneath large lips, the placement of

the arms and hands, with the right arm bent and the left extended, the crossing of the legs from left to right, dictating the rhythmic folds and silhouette of the drapery, and even the slight halo of light around the contours of the body which seem to heighten the sense of vulnerability and psychological inwardness in each sitter. In my view, there are enough visual correspondences to suggest that his recent viewing of *The Mad Woman* may to some degree have informed Freud's conception of his portrait of Kitty Garman, which also projects an intense psychological presence. Such a reading is compatible with Hyman's suggestion in *The Battle for Realism* that Freud was responding in the late 1940s not just to Old Master traditions, the usual narrative, but also to other aspects of current French art, notably the work of Balthus.⁴¹

From the evidence accumulated thus far, we can reasonably claim that an enthusiastic interest in Soutine was emanating from both the work and the conversation of Bacon and Freud, who in turn became significant points of inspiration for artists such as Auerbach and Kossoff at the point when they were crystallising their own pictorial languages in the early 1950s. Both of the latter were students at the Royal College of Art during the period when Bacon was using a studio there, and exerting general inspiration on the work of students, even though he was not officially teaching. Within that context, the key encounter that Auerbach and Kossoff experienced with pictures by Soutine in the original took place, I would argue, in 1953. This was also a Damascene moment, it appears, for David Sylvester, who recalled many years later that 'around 1953 Bacon took me to the Redfern Gallery to see two or three C  ret landscapes that were hanging there (one was purchased by the Tate some ten years later)'.⁴² This refers to *Landscape at C  ret (The Storm)*, which was now one of the four pictures by Soutine included in the gallery's exhibition *Russian   migr   Artists in Paris*, on show in November and December 1953.⁴³ Once again, it proves less easy to identify the other pictures, but I would argue that the presence of *Landscape at C  ret* is sufficient to support the idea that seeing this exhibition proved a crucial catalyst for Auerbach and Kossoff, who may or may not also have been encouraged to visit the Redfern Gallery by a zealous Bacon.

In his 1992 monograph on Auerbach, drawing on extensive conversations with the artist, Robert Hughes remarked that 'one of the painters he most loved in the 1950s was Chaim Soutine'. He then reported Auerbach's revealing comments about what he saw and valued in the earlier artist:

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I can't deny that Soutine had a very great effect on me, especially the Céret pictures. I can't think of him as an expressionist artist, but as a great draughtsman who follows the form around the back and out the other side... There is absolutely nothing pedantic about Soutine's drawing; on the other hand, he didn't just make up shapes for the sake of making them up. One always feels a correspondence with the motif...⁴⁴

For Auerbach, looking at the Céret picture seems to have played a key role in accelerating the jump he made to his fully realised artistic idiom, accomplished while he was still a student at the Royal College. *Summer Building Site* of 1952 may be the picture in which Auerbach first sensed his singular identity as a painter; by his own account, but it was the pictures from the next year or two, exhibited in his 1955 degree show and then in his first one man show early the following year at the Beaux-Arts Gallery, that manifested a far more radical willingness to subsume literal references to the motif and its distinct elements into dark, intense, strongly tonal and astonishingly coagulated pictorial surfaces, barely legible in terms of imagery. Judging from the building site pictures, as well as the Tate's *E.O.W. Nude*, the two portraits of Leon Kossoff, and the earliest known Primrose Hill picture, 1954 was the year in which Auerbach started to produce pictures that he truly valued and wanted to preserve. It is therefore plausible to regard viewing the Soutines at the Redfern in late 1953 as an important catalyst.⁴⁵ At any rate, this cluster of Auerbachs possesses a number of visual affinities with the Tate's Soutine. There is most obviously the viscous materiality of the actual paint, built up from layered strokes and marks made with what appear to be large, and probably quite hard brushes. In both cases, the substance of paint reads as an equivalent to the visceral physical presence of the motif, rather than as virtuoso brushwork, displayed for purely aesthetic or expressive purposes. In the case of *Building Site, St Pancras – Summer* (1954), compare the directional diagonal marks in the lower right corners of each picture, or the superimposition of a lighter tone defining the contour of the distant building and mountain, in roughly the same place to the upper left of the two works, and evoking the luminous sky against which such features are silhouetted (Figure 4). Compare also the use of short dark bands to create an underlying spatial armature, especially in what reads as the middle distance of a sequence of spatial zones. A similar, generally dark palette of blacks, muddy off whites, earth colours, and the odd accent of more positive colour may be seen in both the Soutine and in other Auerbachs such as *Building Site, Portobello Road – Winter* and *Building Site near St Pauls*, both also from 1954.



Fig. 4. Frank Auerbach, *Building Site, St Pancras – summer*, 1954. Oil on board. 103×128.3 cm. Private Collection.

Needless to say, there are significant differences of emphasis. The Auerbachs seem more architecturally, less rhythmically structured. One might sense in his work the inheritance of Walter Sickert rather than Van Gogh. But the visual evidence suggests that looking at this Soutine, and perhaps others very like it, was fundamentally important at this stage for Auerbach. The recent Courtauld Gallery show demonstrated vividly how the example of Soutine provided Auerbach with a certain ideal of surface physicality, into which he could then proceed to insert an increasingly exact description of the spatial construction and detailing of his subject, and an increasingly rigorous sense of geometric structure.

Leon Kossoff's surviving works from 1954, such as *Railway Bridge*, *Mornington Crescent* and *St Paul's Building Site*, represent perhaps the closest point of convergence between the work of these two close friends. Moreover such Kossoffs echo, if anything even more closely, the distinctive idiom apparent in Soutine's vision of Céret. Indeed, Kossoff's close scrutiny of the Tate Soutine seems evident from the

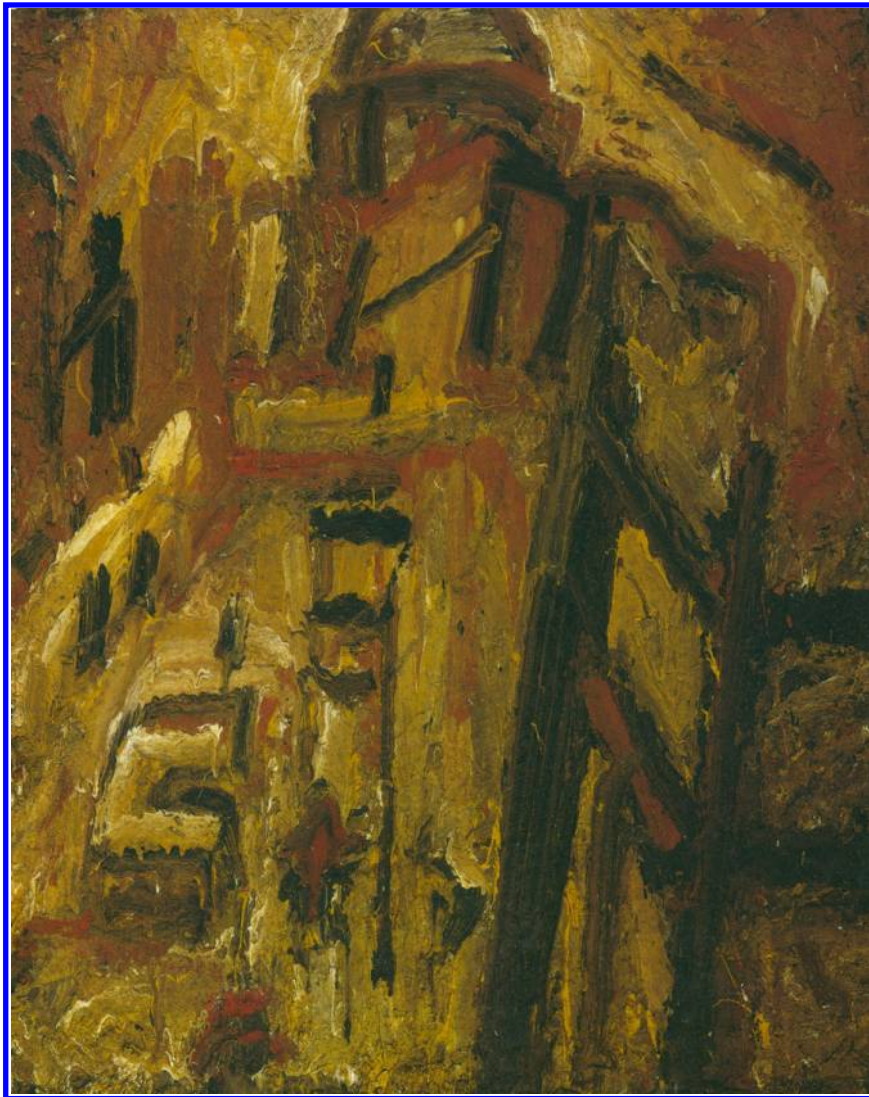


Fig. 5. Leon Kossoff, *St Paul's Building Site*, 1954. Oil on board. 152.4×121.9 cm. Private Collection.

overall tonality, viewpoint and surface texture of *St Paul's Building Site* (Figure 5), as well as specific passages such as the high-key diagonal accent to the left, compared with the row of houses in the Soutine, and the armature of strong black forms disposed to the right of the two compositions.

On another level, Soutine's explicit variations on Rembrandtian imagery such as beef carcasses and female bathers foreshadow the adaptations that both Auerbach and Kossoff realised after works by the great Dutch artist in the National Gallery. Indeed a profound and acknowledged admiration for the subject matter and painterly technique of Rembrandt is a further common thread in the work of both these painters and also Bacon and Freud. Famously, there is a strong Jewish dimension to Rembrandt's art, both in his choice of Old Testament themes for subject pictures, and in his portraiture. The affinity brings into focus the complex and somewhat intangible issue of the significance for his English reception and posthumous influence of Soutine's Jewishness, which had always been a point of reference in the critical literature on his work.⁴⁶ After the revelation of the Holocaust, it seemed more appropriate and necessary than ever to emphasise the tragic aspect of Soutine's life and art. In the catalogue of the 1953 *Russian Emigré Artists in Paris* show at the Redfern, we read the familiar refrain that 'from his infancy which he spent in the ghetto his life was destined to be hard and unhappy'. But this reading is now taken much further: 'Soutine was all his life obsessed by the persecution of his race and he himself had to escape from the Nazi menace in Paris during the last world war. His paintings are fraught with tragedy and power.'⁴⁷ All but one of the artists in the show was Jewish, and their originality was said to reside 'in their essentially Russian-Jewish vision which has remained individualistic'.⁴⁸ Soutine in particular evidently came to distil the fate and sensibility of the twentieth-century Jew, and this may have been a key element in his artistic and emotional appeal for Auerbach, Freud and Kossoff, who all came from European Jewish families profoundly affected by recent events, and equally for Sylvester, who was also Jewish. Bacon was the only one of this circle who was not.

Kossoff was descended from a Russian Jewish family who had emigrated from the Ukraine to escape persecution, and he may therefore have especially identified with the tendency identified in the Redfern Gallery show. He certainly acknowledged (but also qualified) his sense of identity in a 1959 interview in *The Jewish Chronicle*, where he was quoted as saying:

Of course my Jewishness must emerge in my work, so must my love of Rembrandt and Michelangelo and all the things that matter to me... But it is not just a question of subject matter. I prefer the living reality of Soutine, who never used a Jewish symbol, to the sweetness of Chagall... Soutine, like all great painters, has had to destroy all the wrappings of conventional thought which were between him and

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the creation of the living image, and though in the end he seems to reveal only his miserable Jewish self, he does so in a living atmosphere of grandeur and immortality which transcends national or religious barriers'.⁴⁹

It is perhaps in Kossoff's work that we discern the strongest legacy of Soutine's figure paintings, particularly the series of pictures of an elderly man from around the same time as the Céret landscapes. The affinity is evident in the rhythmic but utterly uningratiating build up of the substance of paint in Kossoff's early portraits of his family and friends, and in their aspiration to convey precisely that expressive fusion of pathos and grandeur that the artist invoked in his interview. For Kossoff it was this fundamental sensibility, rather than superficial subject matter, that encapsulated his own emphatic sense of Jewishness. For all their visual points of contact, the humanist and expressionistic dimensions of Soutine with which Kossoff identified were ultimately very different from Auerbach's version of the artist, as summed up by the remark quoted earlier: 'I can't think of him as an expressionist artist, but as a great draughtsman'.

Aside from the possible significance of his Jewishness, why did Soutine start to mean so much to these two young art students? Certainly his work was not received in a vacuum. In artistic terms his art represented a yet more extreme and uncompromising extension of the painterly aesthetic they had both assimilated from studying with Bomberg a few years earlier, or indeed of that evident in the work of Matthew Smith, whose Tate retrospective earlier in 1953 could be viewed in relation to the short Bacon text in the catalogue (a more telling commentary perhaps on Bacon's own work) in which he stated that Smith was 'one of the very few English painters since Constable and Turner to be concerned with painting—that is, with attempting to make idea and technique inseparable. Painting in this sense tends towards a complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa... painting today is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down'.⁵⁰ Such thinking opens up larger intellectual contexts for the attraction to Soutine. In his 1963 text Sylvester presented Soutine as the true successor to Cézanne, in defiance of the more obvious continuity with Van Gogh. This perspective reflected the stance projected in a cult text of the period, namely D. H. Lawrence's 'Introduction to His Paintings', which had first been published in 1929 but was reprinted in 1950 in the widely accessible Penguin paperback edition of the *Selected Essays*.⁵¹ The essay by the admired novelist

was clearly relished by Sylvester and his artist friends as an anti-Bloomsbury diatribe, a plea for the role of bodily consciousness in the making and viewing of art. Lawrence argued vehemently against the formalist orthodoxies designed to support abstraction, and in favour of the contrary view that 'in Cézanne modern French art made its first step back to real substance . . . He wanted to *express* what he suddenly, convulsedly knew! the existence of matter'.⁵² Sylvester cited Lawrence in his critical commentary on Bomberg as well as Soutine.⁵³ The copy of a 1950 edition of the *Selected Essays* in Francis Bacon's studio archive in Dublin testifies to its currency.⁵⁴ For his part, Auerbach stated in a 1978 interview: 'Actually D. H. Lawrence on Cézanne is better than anyone else. He talks about the effort to disentangle himself from the clichés of painting and to present things raw.'⁵⁵

In these artistic circles, I suggest, Lawrence's aesthetic and the practice of Soutine proved eminently compatible with one another in a climate strongly informed by French Existentialism. Soutine seemed to epitomise what an art might look like that articulated this very particular conception of human subjectivity, then at its most prestigious and influential internationally. As Paul Moorhouse has suggested, Existentialism offers a clear parallel to the emphasis in the work of Auerbach and Kossoff on art as process rather than as finished product. For such artists, by implication, a prolonged accumulation of decisions and revisions appeared to correspond, both metaphorically and literally, to an essentially improvisational idea of human existence, given that one could no longer believe with any authenticity in pre-existing religious, social or artistic values.⁵⁶ Elaborations of the Existentialist slogan that 'existence precedes essence' were available in quite accessible philosophical texts. But it would be surprising if artists had not also encountered Jean-Paul Sartre's literary exploration of such ideas in his novel *La Nausée*, published in France in 1938 and appearing in English translation as *Nausea* in 1949. Here the notion of existence coming before essence has a somewhat different resonance. The narrator in the novel provides a vivid distillation of what an alienated existentialist sensibility might feel like, subjectively. In one episode he is sitting in the park and becomes overwhelmed by the sheer materiality of the external universe:

The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root . . . Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty

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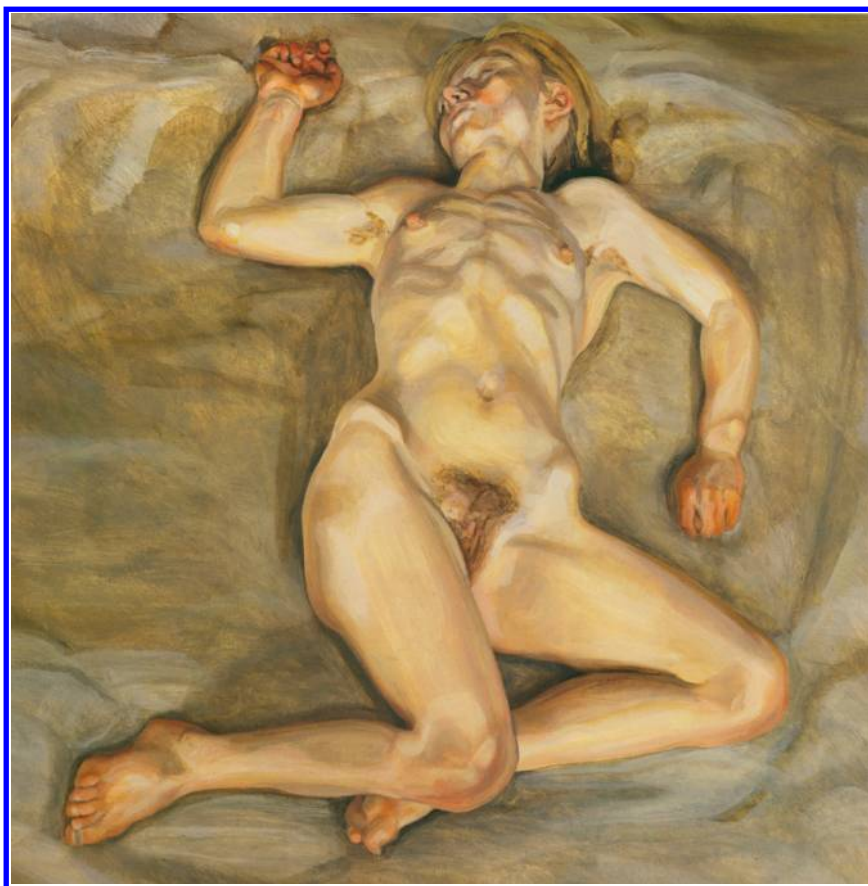
mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me. And then I had this revelation ...⁵⁷

That revelation was a metaphysical sense of the absolute Absurdity or contingency of things, which provided 'the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life'.⁵⁸ His experience of the tree root epitomised the gulf between physical existence in the raw, and the conceptualisations that we seek to impose:

Faced with that big, rugged paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge had any importance; the world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explicable by the rotation of a segment of a straight line around one of its extremities. But a circle doesn't exist either. That root, on the other hand, existed in so far that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, repeatedly brought me back to my own existence ... I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction-pump, to that, to that hard, compact sea-lion skin, to that oily, horny, stubborn look ...⁵⁹

Pictures by Soutine such as *Gnarled Trees* (c. 1921, Yamazaki Mazak Corporation, Japan), and the early landscapes in general, provided a striking pictorial equivalent to a passage such as this one in *Nausea*.⁶⁰ This parallel is indeed implicit in the 1963 account of *Landscape at Céret* by Sylvester, the passage of text with which I began, and which emphasises the rawness and pre-conceptual aspect of the sensations of the external world transmitted by Soutine's picture. Likewise, in the early paintings of Auerbach and Kossoff, the elements of the motif seem to float free from ready legibility, and to become embedded in viscous paint surfaces that frequently look rather like a 'sea-lion skin', with an 'oily, horny, stubborn look'. Building-site themes in particular allowed them both to generate a kind of painting in which raw mud, or the fundamental contingency of the world, could be signified by paint surface and colour, while elements of linear structure, corresponding to architectural forms, evoked the painter's desperate search for order and the human impulse somehow to impose structure and linguistic convention onto the inchoate mess of experience. In other words, the theme functioned poetically and metaphorically, rather than as a more literal project of documenting the post-war rebuilding of London.

I have focused on what appear to be specific derivations from, or responses to, particular known works by Soutine within the early work of the core 'School of London' painters. A more ambitious account would elaborate the story into further aspects of their work and into subsequent decades. After the late 1950s, for example, Bacon moved



*Fig. 6. Lucian Freud, *Naked Girl Asleep II*, 1968. Oil on canvas. 55.8×55.8 cm. Private Collection.*

away from an all-over painterly idiom, but one might argue even so that the later portraits, with their rhythmic accumulation of curvilinear forms and marks and their emotive distortions of the human form, reflect the continuing imprint of Soutine's figurative imagery. In Freud's work, it was not until the later 1950s that his picture-making methods acquired any affinities with the loose technique characteristic of Soutine. This is usually put down to a dialogue with the work of Francis Bacon, but that is not incompatible with paying a new kind of attention to Soutine. Moreover the lasting impact on Freud of Soutine's dead animal pictures, remarked upon by Gowing, might explain the remarkable compositional parallels between pictures such as Soutine's

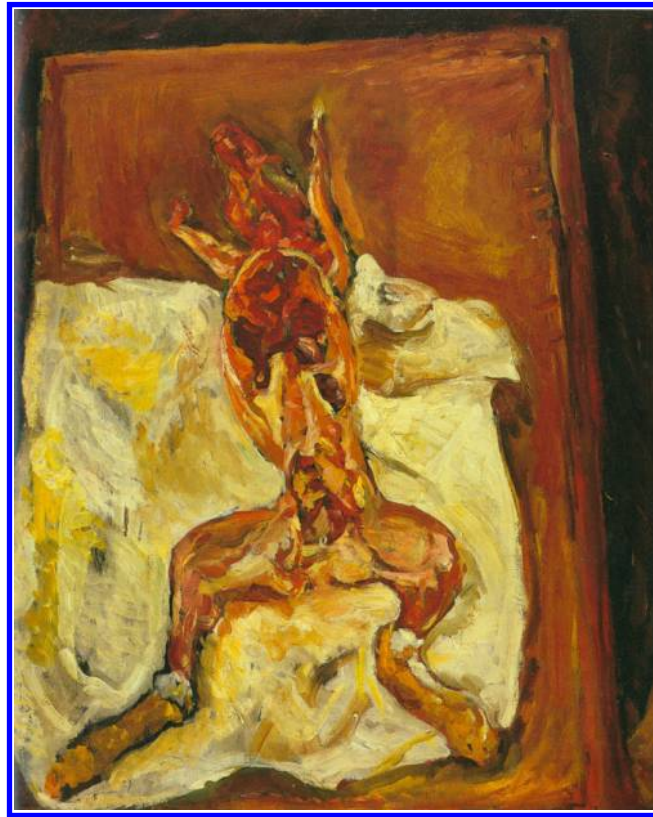


Fig. 7. Chaim Soutine, *Flayed Rabbit*, c.1921. Oil on canvas. 73×30 cm.
Barnes Foundation, Merion.

Flayed Rabbit, the Barnes Foundation picture if not the unidentifiable version owned by Adrian Ryan, and some of Freud's later nudes, such as *Naked Girl Asleep* (1968) or *Rose* (1978–79), affinities which give a different edge perhaps to the frequent comment that in such pictures Freud treats his naked sitters like so many slabs of meat (Figures 6 and 7). The close but elevated viewpoint, the placing of the figure against a white sheet, and the splayed legs, might all be seen as residual echoes of Soutine, feeding into the process of setting up compositions that he painted so scrupulously from the life. In a 2006 exhibition catalogue about Soutine's inspiration Auerbach for his part is quoted as remarking: 'My interest in Soutine has never slackened', while Kossoff allowed two pictures to be included 'to articulate his involvement with Soutine'.⁶¹ The more recent work of Auerbach indicates that he has in a sense recapitulated Soutine's own artistic trajectory, evolving from

the darkness and indigestible look of his early work to an idiom that is lighter in touch and mood, as well as in the quality of pictorial illumination that the pictures transmit.

From the evidence accumulated here, one can at any rate begin to understand why David Sylvester was so adamant in 1959 that Soutine was the artist of the pre-war period who had had the most to offer contemporary artists, both international, as has been demonstrated by others, and also British. For all the striking differences between the work of Bacon, Freud, Auerbach and Kossoff, one common denominator between them was a highly creative assimilation of diverse aspects of the early art of Chaim Soutine, as apparent in actual works that they had the opportunity to contemplate. This is an important but under-researched historical phenomenon in relation to post-war British art. In more general terms, the topic provides a fascinating case study with regard to Baxandall's observation that 'influence' always entails active and purposeful interpretation of the prototype in question, rather than mere passive absorption, and to Gombrich's argument fifty years ago in *Art and Illusion* to the effect that paintings ultimately owe more to other paintings than to direct observation.

* The thinking in this article was developed in response to Barnaby Wright's kind invitation to contribute a paper to the Courtauld Gallery Study Day 'Art in the Post-War World: Frank Auerbach and his Contemporaries' (5 December 2009).

Notes

1. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1960). The book derived from Gombrich's 1956 A. W. Mellon lectures at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. An interest in artistic dialogue has recently been most evident in exhibitions and their catalogues (e.g. *Matisse/Picasso*, *Turner and the Masters*, *Picasso looks at Degas*), in part perhaps because these are less hampered by the need to discuss such issues on the basis of reproductions.
2. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 268.
3. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Influence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 58–62.
4. *Chaim Soutine, 1893–1943* (Edinburgh International Festival, 1963).
5. David Sylvester, 'Introduction', *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9, reprinted with minor changes as 'Soutine', in David Sylvester, *On Modern Art* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 119–21. For a detailed account of the Céret period, see *Soutine: Céret 1919–1922* (Céret: Musée d'Art Moderne de Céret, 2000).
6. See Maurice Tuchman, Esti Dunow and Klaus Perls, *Chaim Soutine (1893–1943): Catalogue Raisonné* (Cologne: Bendikt Taschen Verlag, 2001), Landscapes no. 71.
7. David Sylvester, 'Soutine Reconsidered in Paris Exhibitions', *The New York Times*, 6 September 1959, p. 16.

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8. Norman L. Kleeblatt and Kenneth E. Silver (eds), *Chaim Soutine: An Expressionist in Paris* (Munich and New York: Prestel Publications and Jewish Museum of New York, 1998).
9. Mortimer Wheeler, *Soutine* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1950).
10. Kleeblatt and Silver, *Chaim Soutine*, pp. 15–16.
11. Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens (eds), *Francis Bacon* (London: Tate Gallery, 2008), p. 154.
12. Barnaby Wright (ed), *Frank Auerbach: London Building Sites 1952–1962* (London: The Courtauld Gallery in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2009), p. 28.
13. On the parallel Sickert inspiration, see Martin Hammer, ‘To Camden Town and Beyond: Sickert’s Legacy since 1930’ (*The Camden Town Project*, forthcoming Tate website, 2011).
14. See exhibitions listing in Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, p. 88.
15. *The Tragic Painters* (London: Alex Reid and LeFevre, June 1938), including as nos. 19–23 Soutine’s *Paysage Provençal* (1923), *La soubrette* (1925), *Groom* (1926), *Le petit pâtissier* (1928) and *Grand arbre à Vence* (1933).
16. *Ibid.*, catalogue introduction by Stephan Bourgeois, n. p.
17. *Chaim Soutine* (London: Gimpel Fils, 23 April–17 May 1947), nos. 14 (*Lapin écorché*) and 12 (*Nature morte*).
18. *Ibid.*, no. 15 (see Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, Still-Lives no.105).
19. *Ibid.*, nos. 5 (*La Folle*) and 13 (*Le Boeuf écorché*). The former is presumably Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, Portraits no 32, where it is tentatively proposed that the work was shown in the 1947 Gimpel Fils show. The latter corresponds to Still Lives No. 99, though the 1947 showing is omitted.
20. *Ibid.*, nos. 2 (*La Dame en bleu*) and 1 (*La Cuisinière*).
21. *Ibid.*, nos. 4 and 7 (*Les Petits Ecoliers* and *Paysage*).
22. *Ibid.*, no 9 (*Paysage d’orage*). On the earlier history of the work, see the Tate Collection website: (<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=-1&workid=13658&searchid=false&roomid=false&tabview=text&texttype=8>).
23. Maurice Collis, ‘Haim Soutine’, *Ibid.*, n. p.
24. *L’Ecole de Paris 1900–1950* (London: Royal Academy, 13 January to 7 March 1951), nos. 85–8.
25. On the problem of Soutine attributions, see Merlin James, ‘Chaim Soutine. Catalogue Raisonné’, *Burlington Magazine*, 136, Nov. 1994, pp. 775–7.
26. Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, Still Lifes no. 99.
27. See Martin Hammer, ‘Francis Bacon and the Lefevre Gallery’, *Burlington Magazine*, 152, May 2010, pp. 307–12.
28. Cited in Gary Tinterow, ‘Bacon and his Critics’, in Gale and Stephens, *Francis Bacon*, p. 31.
29. David Sylvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 87.
30. Francis Bacon Studio Archive, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin.
31. For new insights into the Parisian connections of Bacon’s milieu, see Carol Jacobi, ‘Cat’s Cradle – Francis Bacon and the Art of “Isabel Rawsthorne”’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 10, November 2009, pp. 293–314. On Watson’s ownership of a Soutine, see Roger Bristow, *The Last Bohemians: The Two Roberts – Colquhoun and MacBryde* (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2010), p. 93.
32. Daniel Farson, *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 105.

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33. Lawrence Gowing, *Lucian Freud* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982), p. 13. Gowing is echoed in Sebastian Smee, *Lucian Freud* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), p. 14, where *Dead Heron* (1945) is tellingly juxtaposed with Soutine's *Two Pheasants* (1919), also an image of dead birds disposed frontally and upside down, although the affinity is not elaborated in the text.
34. Julian Machin, *Adrian Ryan: Rather a Rum Life* (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2009), pp. 47–9.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 48. The picture is reproduced (n. p.).
37. See his *Skate* (1945), reproduced *ibid* (n. p.).
38. Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, Still Lifes no. 47.
39. Cited in Smee, *Lucian Freud*, p. 14.
40. *Chaim Soutine* (Gimpel Fils), no. 5. See note 17.
41. James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 104–107.
42. Sylvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, p. 87.
43. *Russian Émigré Artists in Paris* (London: Redfern Gallery, November and December 1953), nos 1–4. The show also included Alexsey Grishchenko, Mane-Katz, Pinchus Kremegne, Marc Chagall, Osip Zadkine and several other now relatively obscure figures.
44. Robert Hughes, *Frank Auerbach* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), p. 86.
45. Wright, *Frank Auerbach*, includes the transitional *Building Site, Bruton Street: winter* (2) and *Building Site, Earls Court Road: winter* (3), both dated 1953. This may qualify my argument, although these could have been finished at the end of that year, or the dates may register when he began the pictures, which often took many months to realise, rather than the point at which he decided they were finished.
46. Kleeblatt and Silver, *Chaim Soutine*, *passim*.
47. See brief profile in *Russian Émigré Artists* n. p.
48. Alexander Watt, introduction in *Russian Émigré Artists* (n. p.).
49. Leon Kossoff, interview with N. G. Stone in 'The Artist and the Community', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 27 November 1959.
50. Francis Bacon, 'Matthew Smith—a Painter's Tribute', in *Matthew Smith* (London: Tate Gallery, 1953), p. 12.
51. D. H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to His Paintings', *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), pp. 307–48.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 326–7.
53. Sylvester, *On Modern Art*, p. 168.
54. Francis Bacon Studio Archive, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin.
55. *Frank Auerbach* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1978), p. 22.
56. See Paul Moorhouse, 'A Human Universe: Auerbach's Building-Site Paintings and Existentialism' in Wright, *Frank Auerbach*, pp. 56–71.
57. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin* (London: John Lehmann, 1949, translated by Lloyd Alexander; thereafter *Nausea*), p. 182. French edition published 1938.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 185–6.
60. Tuchman, Dunow and Perls, *Chaim Soutine*, Landscapes no. 66; Wheeler, *Soutine*, p. 49.
61. *Soutine and Modern Art: The New Landscape/The New Still Life* (New York: Cheim & Read, 2006), n. p.